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Steve Smith

SPIRIT-LED ELDERING

Integral to Our Faith and Practice

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**Theology Library
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Acknowledgments

I am indebted to many who, over time, have generously been willing to critique drafts of this material and have encouraged me to persist. My sister, Betty Ann Greenwood, kept me on point with her challenging questions and helpful suggestions as I worked through early drafts. My daughter, René Larrabee, has been the most recent and present person to assist me in editing and completing this essay. Her insightful comments, perceptive dialogue, helpful overview, and good sense of communication as well as her computer skills, made a profound difference. Bob Dockhorn of *Friends Journal* and J. Bill Ratliff of Earlham School of Religion also offered me much help. Joy Moll kept me from giving up, and the Pendle Hill editor, Chel Avery, has worked her magic in making this essay readable and correct. Many workshop participants have added much with their valuable contributions.

Publications staff: Shirley Dodson

Pamphlet edited by Chel Avery and designed by Mary Helgesen Gabel

Requests for permission to quote or to translate should be addressed to:
Pendle Hill Publications, 338 Plush Mill Road, Wallingford, PA 19086-6023

Email: publications@pendlehill.org

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ISBN 978-0-87574-392-9

October 2007

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What is Spirit-led eldering? I am eager to share my views about this frequently asked question, though I find it challenging. Defining Spirit-led eldering is like defining the wind, the fragrance of a flower, the power of the Spirit. I find it amorphous, ineffable, and various. The closest I come to explaining Spirit-led eldering is to refer to its essence, which is grace-filled. It is a sacred point of view, a way of seeing that can penetrate any experience, any structure, any situation and, by the nature of its expression, help us to regain or maintain our capacity for being spiritually grounded and faithfully connected to the Spirit and to each other.

But what is Spirit-led eldering? It is offering spiritual leadership, which is to support and encourage the life of the Spirit in an individual or group, or to raise questions and explore, with another person or group, ways in which they may be more faithful to the Spirit, or it is simply being prayerfully present. No particular act or behavior in itself qualifies as Spirit-led eldering. It is the well-grounded intention and attitude of a compassionate heart and mind, led by Spirit, that makes it so. When correction or support is offered that is not so guided, I see it as something other than eldering.

In recent years we have become mindful of such practices as restorative justice, affirmative inquiry, appreciative listening, and servant leadership, each of which works with the whole

person, with a full awareness of who each individual is at the core. Spirit-led eldering is in this genre, having a full awareness of *both* the substance (that which connects us to God) and shadow (that which separates us from God). The emphasis here is on giving attention to our substance, our true nature, as a basis for resolving any issues with our shadow. The focus for such work is on calling forth what is spiritually true.

So, again, what is Spirit-led eldering? In a recent workshop a participant asked me why I put “Spirit-led” in front of “eldering.” She thought that perhaps it was just to make the term sound good. She wondered what difference it made. For me, it makes a profound difference to rely on a connection with the Divine as a source of direction, for this involves listening to the still small voice for guidance, being filled with inspiration, and following one’s intuition as well as trusting the awareness of a larger whole. Being Spirit-led is key. Without having this intention, we are likely to speak merely from our self-centered thoughts and feelings or from unresolved personal issues.

With this spiritual foundation, the point is to engage in a process of discernment that helps us to discover the best way to be used in the service of the Spirit. One may be called to lend a hand, to give support to another person in order to help him be in alignment with the Spirit, or to acknowledge how well she is practicing faithfulness to the life of the Spirit. Or it may become clear that it is not one’s call to be involved.

Community understandings and knowledge of Quaker faith and practice can be helpful as points of reference, but we need to be very mindful that the Spirit’s work is not bound by any particular process or procedure. Spirit-led eldering can be either spontaneous or intentional. It can be affirmative and supportive, or it can boldly interrupt an oppressive, negative,

or violent pattern in an appropriate and workable way. In the variety of stories that follow, we will see different ways in which the Spirit affects an individual, a committee, or a meeting. Most of these stories reflect intentional Spirit-led eldering.

For me Spirit-led eldering, support, and affirmation are essential and integral to our Quaker way of faith and practice; otherwise our life as a Quaker community falters because we are not tending to a critical aspect in our individual lives and in our lives together. In the recent past, Friends have tended to be fearful of loving other persons in this profound way, of caring enough to be present for them, listening to them, and trusting the work of the Spirit. We may have been fearful not only of seeking and trusting the Spirit but also of taking the steps to prepare ourselves to be an adequate channel, or to act in a way that appears intrusive or socially unacceptable. However, intentional Spirit-led eldering does require that we move past such fears into a fresh orientation toward ourselves, our purpose, each other, and God.

In general, one must be a prepared person for Spirit-led eldering to be most effective. Such preparation, as part of the discernment process, may include prayer, journaling, exploring with a spiritual friend, or consulting with a committee. Queries that appear later in this essay may be helpful for reaching clarity about carrying out the eldering function.

In our monthly meetings we are likely to have structures that provide a container and an opportunity for Spirit-led eldering. Some of the structures that we are familiar with include the nominating committee, care and oversight¹ committee (including applications and transfers of membership), spiritual friendships, teaching, meeting for worship, nurturing and calling forth gifts, and clearness committees. It can also be helpful to note that Spirit-led eldering can be carried out in

unstructured ways. There are limitless ways that this nurturing process can happen. We will see this in the stories that follow.

My first story is about a person giving the plenary talk at a yearly meeting session. He was speaking to the assembled group about the "Life of Jesus." His expressions were passionate.

As he continued speaking, a woman stood up in the back of the room and called out, "You are making me very uncomfortable talking about Jesus."

The speaker, after a lengthy pause, connected with that stable Source within and then said, with compassion and understanding, "Perhaps you need to feel uncomfortable." After another pause, the speaker went on to complete his talk as planned.

Later, as he was getting ready to leave the site, the woman who had called to him across the room came up to him and, extending her hand, thanked him. She commented, "I needed to hear what you said."

This incident is only one form of Spirit-led eldering, but we see a number of the elements that are likely to be a part of any Spirit-led eldering experience. Paramount is the accepted presence of the Spirit and of someone listening to it—someone who has learned that remaining faithful to the relationship with the Spirit is primary. Also important in this situation is that the speaker knew and held to his true identity as a child of God. He was sturdy in his sense of the Spirit so he could find the courage and strength to practice Spirit-led eldering. The opportunity for Spirit-led eldering is often unexpected. We need to be prepared by our discipline and practice both to carry out Spirit-led eldering and to accept whatever the outcome may be.

Sandra Cronk, in her pamphlet *Gospel Order*, described other ways that the eldering function has been carried out:

The admonitory aspect of mutual accountability involved all kinds of situations, including helping people to recognize and exercise their gifts, to see where the broken and unfaithful places were in their lives, to overcome paralyzing fears, to discern leadings, and to know when they had outrun or lagged behind their Guide.²

Cronk emphasizes that the purpose of eldering is not to prove another wrong and ourselves right in the usual sense, but to move toward greater faithfulness together.

Reviving the lay ministry of Spirit-led eldering as part of our Quaker culture would provide a process for individuals, so led, to work directly with challenging situations as they arise, without engaging in destructive, behind-the-scenes criticism, invalidation, or negative gossip.

The importance of learning what may be required of us as Quakers was vividly brought home to me at a recent Friends General Conference workshop. A participant came up to me at the close of one of the daily sessions and commented longingly, "If the practice of Spirit-led lay eldering that we have been learning about this week had been alive in my meeting nine years ago, I doubt I would have felt I had to leave. Perhaps now I will try to be involved in a meeting again."

Although we will not be reviewing the history of eldering, there are two things about early eldering practices that I want to mention. The first is that I am inspired by the early Friends. The founders of the Religious Society of Friends saw the true church as spiritual, invisible, and beyond form and structure. George Fox's leadership, like a magnet, drew them together, and they united in their zeal to preach and teach what they had found. From this gathered community mature, spiritually-grounded persons emerged as guides. These discerning Friends began to live out the eldering function. They

came to be called *elders* as a term for their function, not as an office that they filled. These weighty, discerning Friends were often referred to as Friends “well grown in the truth.”

The eldering function was integral to a deepening spiritual life among Friends and to their faith and practice. For me early Friends offer a model of Spirit-led eldering that is often lacking today in our communities.

My second point is that a period of time came when specific individuals within meetings were assigned responsibility for maintaining Friends’ values and the distinctive Quaker way of life. In order to protect Friends from corrupting influences of the society at large, these individuals became over-vigilant, caught up in hierarchy, criticalness, and heavy-handedness to the detriment of our Society’s health and growth. This strictness fostered a negative attitude and misunderstanding about the ways in which eldering could contribute to the health of the Society of Friends.³

In the present we can view eldering in a different light. Challenging experiences of my own and others have shown the tremendous value of authentic affirmation and the positive power of Spirit-led truth-telling and plain speaking. These eldering practices have been essential to my spiritual journey. I would like to see them return as an integral part of the Quaker faith community.

Early Examples of Eldering

Examples from our past inform us and help us gain an understanding of what is foundational for the eldering process as well as of the variety of ways in which it has been expressed in the Society of Friends.

One illustration is told by John Richardson. As a young man, inexperienced in the ministry, he spoke at length in a meeting for worship attended by William Penn and a number of other leading Friends. After the meeting, Penn addressed him, commenting, "The main part of the service of this day's work went on thy side, and we saw it, and were willing and easy to give way to this Truth, though it was through thee, who appears but like a shrub; and it is reasonable the Lord should make use of whom he pleases. . . ."4 This simple story of affirmation is a prototype of two additional modes of eldering: 1) mentoring, which can guide and encourage a person in a rightly ordered direction; and 2) evoking gifts, which can bring one into closer relationship to God and to the community.

Howard Brinton describes a practice that began in the early eighteenth century. In this period, the monthly meeting was the center of all aspects of Quaker life: social, political, and economic. It was customary within the monthly meeting for a committee to visit each family at least once a year. The committee's members were called "overseers," but they carried out the eldering function, guided by queries and prayerful discernment. During its periodic visit the committee, in addition to any other matters to be considered, lovingly and empathetically addressed any moral offenses. A person who came to repentance was asked to make acknowledgment of the error in writing and bring it to the next meeting for business. If the offender refused to do so, the committee continued its labor of communication and prayer. After a year's probation, and if the offense was sufficiently serious, the person was often removed from formal membership in the meeting, although such individuals were still welcome to attend meetings for worship.⁵

As our meetings today serve the members of our community through pastoral care work, do we include minimally an annual visit to members and members' families? As a community, are we concerned about the morals and practices of our members? In what ways do we practice accountability?

A vivid example of effective eldering was described by Quaker minister Samuel Bownas in his memoirs. As a young man he followed the Quaker customs of dress and attended worship, although he frequently slept through it. But in his heart, he cared much more for pleasure than for religion. Then one First Day in late 1696, he was called to account by a young minister:

She was very zealous, and I fixing my eye upon her, she, with a great zeal, pointed her finger at me, uttering these words with much power; "A traditional Quaker, thou comest to meeting as thou went from it the last time, and goest from it as thou came to it, but art no better for thy coming; what wilt thou do in the end?" This was so pat to my then condition that, like Saul, I was smitten to the ground, but turning my thoughts inward, in secret I cried, "Lord, what shall I do to help it?" And a voice as it were spoke in my heart saying, "Look unto me, and I will help thee;" and I found much comfort, which made me shed abundance of tears.⁶

Following this experience, Bownas eventually grew into a divinely inspired, loved, and respected Gospel minister.

In our present Quaker culture, with its psychological and counseling approaches to human relations, this incident may well be seen as a minister's harsh and inappropriate public condemnation rather than as a minister speaking under the authority of the Spirit. However, I see this admonishment as righteous

judgment and correction that flowed out of a Spirit-led ministry of that time. Howard Brinton wrote, "The minister is an instrument of the Spirit which is in his hearers, as well as himself. If he keeps close to the one Center, he can reach a person along a particular radius. . . . The Spirit leads where it will."⁷

This incident raises some significant questions for me. Does the authority of the Spirit break through our social conventions for its own purposes in ways we have not yet understood or imagined? Are we open and receptive to such possibilities? Does this incident reveal a level of spiritual experience with which modern Friends are unfamiliar and are therefore apt to doubt or question?

What I find compelling and inspiring about the lives of these early Friends is their mutual and active desire to be *accountable* for the spiritual health, nurture, and behavior of members, attenders, and the meeting as a whole. I believe we need to get back to this accountability and to revitalize the culture of mutual spiritual nurturing and care within our faith community.

A Friends meeting is intended to be so much more than a loose association of individuals on separate and private spiritual journeys. Friends are called to be a faith community, seeking to know each other "in that which is Eternal" as we journey together. Ideally we acknowledge that our primary relationship is to God and to that of God in each other. We let go of the idea that we have only private lives and hold ourselves accountable to the authority of the Spirit in the life of the meeting. We grow in a sense of responsibility for each other and become part of a gathered community.

The following true story helps us to get a broader vision of how a simple, straightforward, grounded admonition may provide a basis of guidance in an unusual way.

Richard and Isaac, two Quakers, were neighbors with different viewpoints about everything. A waterway ran between their homes. As part of a dispute about property and water use, Isaac dammed up the waterway. Richard suffered great inward discomfort, more from the broken relationship than from the dammed up water, for being in right relationship was paramount to him. He tried every conceivable method to restore his relationship with Isaac including following the Biblical steps for seeking resolution that were important to early Friends (see Matt. 18:15-17), but none was effective. The Friends who were involved in this process decided that Richard was in the right and that the dam should come down; but Isaac would not budge.

When a visiting minister sat with him, Richard poured out his heart. The minister heard the whole story, then simply replied, "More is required of some than of others."

These words excited in Richard's mind a deeper inquiry:

What could be possibly done that would be likely to have the desired effect? While in this thoughtful and inquiring state of mind, it presented to him, that he must go and wash his neighbor's feet and he would then be friendly with him again.

The answer that came was beyond all "techniques" of conflict resolution. It required giving up claims of being right and going to his neighbor in humility and forgiveness.

When this impression was first made he revolted at the idea and thought that he could not do it but the impression remained so forcibly on his mind, that after a considerable amount of time he became prepared to yield to it and his eyes burst into a flood of tears.

So, early in the morning Richard went to Isaac's house, finding Isaac still in bed. He explained that he had come to wash Isaac's feet. He was concerned to do this so "that they might in future be friendly and live as Friends should do beside each other." At first, Isaac resisted, but as he was rising to dress Richard "took hold of his foot and began the operation of washing it." Eventually, Isaac became calm and allowed Richard to wash both his feet. After dressing, he escorted Richard to the door.

An evident change now took place in his neighbor's disposition and Richard left him to his own reflections. . . . The same day he observed his neighbor with a shovel opening the water course where it could run: and in the afternoon Isaac and his wife came over and made Richard and his family a friendly social visit, manifesting an entirely different disposition from what he had indulged toward him for several years before: for he was now open, neighborly and friendly, as formerly, and continued so the remainder of his days.⁸

What simple but powerful eldering! First the visiting minister was present, listened, and held up Richard's concern. He admonished Richard with a few deeply grounded words. He evoked the Spirit, turning Richard to his own soul. And, in turn, Richard was inspired by the minister's eldering. Richard found himself captured by the image of washing Isaac's feet as a means to express his care and love to Isaac and his desire to be in right relationship with him. Even though Richard initially considered the foot washing revolting and unusual, he found himself led to do exactly that—wash Isaac's feet—and a right relationship was restored.

Questions we may ask:

- To what extent are we willing to give priority to creating and maintaining right relationship with the Spirit and with each other?
- Are we open to inspiration, which may call us to do that which is unfamiliar and extraordinary?
- Can we go beyond what seems fair and right in an ordinary way? Must we repair what we have not broken?
- Do we look first to changing ourselves, initiating actions of restoration and healing, especially when wrong is being done to us?
- What can we take from this story and apply to our own situation? How are we challenged?

Eldering Today

Some years ago, I wrote:

I have come to see Spirit-led eldering as a significant part of the much larger structure of spiritual formation and nurture that is integral to Quakerism. Its implications extend far beyond one particular incident or behavior. Its implications are based on a concern for the wholeness of the person and the meeting. Such eldering recognizes and strengthens our relationship to each other and to God.⁹

Following are some examples of eldering that illustrate how this view is challenged. Current efforts to elder are often *pro forma* and often focus on vocal ministry. On one First Day a senior and seasoned Friend came to me at the rise of meet-

ing and sonorously intoned, "It was only ten minutes into the worship when you rose and spoke. A full twenty minutes is needed." Then he turned and left. I knew that this Friend periodically was the first to speak in our worship—after the first twenty minutes. He had a kernel of truth in his helpful reminder about the usual order of Quaker worship and the importance of being mindful of the worshiping body. But my joyous and flamboyant soul could hardly contain itself that morning, and he did not know me well enough to see what was unusual for me that day. Was this Spirit-led eldering? I experienced it as a reprimand.

On another occasion I was deeply moved in meeting for worship. I recall speaking from a full heart, myself surprised at what came out of my mouth. At the rise of the meeting, I felt fulfilled and at peace. Afterward as I moved among Friends I heard comments: "You were well used." "You were receptive." I call such comments "nurturing nudges." Then a woman approached, clearly enraged. "You have offended me. I am deeply hurt. I don't want to hear the pronoun 'He' used again when referring to deity. How oppressive and insensitive can you be?" Then she turned away and left the meeting house. I heard her pain of feeling excluded. I was empathetic. We didn't know each other, and she was an intermittent attender. I sought her out afterward, but she had moved. My expectations for language when sharing personal beliefs and experiences of our spiritual journeys were different from hers. Was this eldering? Was it Spirit-led? Or was it a strong response to a personal need?

For me, the encounter was an opportunity to stay faithful to the Spirit. I welcomed the circumstance and the person. The encounter also inspired a minute, approved by our meeting for worship for business, that called us to listen, hear, and

be open to any genuine, heartfelt messages of a person's spiritual journey, especially in our meetings for worship.

I imagine that the concern of these eldering persons was hindered by reliance on the generally understood "rules" that Friends have about the use of time and language in worship rather than reliance on spiritual discernment in these particular circumstances. Discernment allows for reflective space between the perception of the need for eldering and the actual carrying out of the eldering function. Allowing for that space enables us to be receptive to the direction of the Inner Light and helps us break free of any biases we may have.

In these two incidents, the focus of the reprimand was narrow, attentive to a one-time act only. The elderd person (myself) was not engaged in dialogue. It seemed to be more about the immediate needs and reactions of the persons expressing their objections than about the larger benefit for each other and for our Friends' community. The responsibility was then left to me to attempt to maintain a right relationship with the speaker. In Spirit-led eldering, the focus is wide. It strives to include whole persons and whole situations, accepted and understood in their fullness. It seeks to restore or foster spiritual relationship.

The elderd person's response is unpredictable, and each of us is responsible for our own emotions. Nonetheless, the eldering function is generally more effective when the person carrying it out seeks an approach that does not *unnecessarily* stir up defensiveness and hurt. In reference to the prophetic ministers who were active in the early years of Quakerism, Howard Brinton wrote, "They could remind their hearers of unpleasant truths in such a spirit of love and genuineness that no anger resulted."¹⁰ This is an effect that I hope today's elders will aspire to.

But it is equally important for eldering persons to remain faithful to their leadings and not to base their approaches solely on the anticipated response of the recipients. This principle may be especially important in situations of irrational or intractable behavior, violence, abuse, or crisis.

Effective intentional eldering usually requires a time commitment and a place apart. Any passing comment made immediately at the rise of the meeting for worship or a committee meeting or during an activity, regardless of the intention, is simply that—a comment that can be informative and/or inspiring but incomplete—a nurturing nudge. The eldering function *in depth* requires, minimally, a deep and intimate exchange that includes finding out what the situation is like for the person being elderd, accepting and understanding that person's condition, and having time for exploratory questions and comments, as well as presenting a perspective that reflects a seasoned concern of the meeting community. This process would provide participants with an opportunity to engage each other, in person and in the Spirit.

On a few occasions I have experienced Friends expressing Spirit-led eldering *during* a meeting for worship, usually in response to some kind of inappropriate speaking or unusual behavior. It may be a loving hand placed on the speaker's shoulder, suggesting caution about continuing; or a Friend may stand in the silence, offering a peaceful and loving presence and radiating a sense of worship until the speaker stops and sits down. It could be that a discerning Friend rises up, goes to embrace the speaker, and the speaker yields and starts to weep. Or, if need be, two inspired Friends, following the same leading, may caringly escort the speaker from the worshiping group. In extreme situations, the meeting might be brought to a close.

The important point is to remain open to the Spirit and to let our imaginations and creativity be touched by that Spirit so that we may be led to meet the occasion appropriately and helpfully. The examples given here are not presented as ones to imitate, but simply to illustrate how the Spirit might work. When such eldering situations occur, ideally some form of follow-up attention is needed as part of caring for one another and in realization of our oneness as a spiritual community.

From two other worship experiences, I learned how practical Spirit-led eldering can be, and how it differs from *pro forma* eldering that merely attempts to enforce the “letter” of rules, without inspiration (see 2 Cor. 3:6). The first occurred after I had prepared myself with prayer and meditation for one of my first times sitting at the head of a large meeting for worship. The meeting, after a brief time of settling, quickly became a “popcorn meeting” with many run-on messages and little or no worshipful time between them. Against some feelings of doubt and trepidation, offset by a strong sense of being led, I found myself standing up, remaining wordless for a time. The meeting became quieter and quieter, and then deeper. Eventually, I did speak: “Some of us are called to speak words. Some of us are called to keep the silence. As we continue to seek a deepening sense of worship, I ask you to keep the silence with me.” I offered a prayer that our gifts might be blessed.

To me, the attitude and awareness that I held within was important. I had no desire to criticize or censure. I wanted to witness to the presence of the Spirit in our midst and make it the center of our attention. I had a tremendous sense of love and caring for all present. At the close of meeting, powerful and loving ripple effects clearly showed that those present had fully embraced the experience. Later I was astounded to

learn that “standing” has historic precedent among Friends. I was also struck by the practicality of this simple spiritual act.

The second experience happened in a meeting for worship during a yearly meeting session. A speaker appeared to have become lost in his message. As clerk of the yearly meeting’s worship and ministry committee, I felt a concern for the quality of the worship. I stood and remained standing for a time after the speaker sat down. I had no words. I was in my head as much as my heart. I wondered about the gathered group. I experienced no quickening or deepening in me or in the worship. I was struck that my action had come from a judging place, not from a joyous sense of holding up our alignment with the Spirit and a sense of love for all gathered. I realized that I had done something that had some effect but was lacking in Spirit.

Does this mean that we should never do anything *pro forma* that appears to need doing? Probably not. But these two experiences point up for me that the power of being Spirit-led can lead us to behave in a creative way unique to the assembled body and to the moment, and that our behavior in a similar situation should not be repeated simply because it has been helpful in the past.

This next example of eldering may cause concern among Friends. As part of an exploration of same-gender commitments, a large meeting I was attending designated half an hour at each monthly meeting for business to be spent listening to individuals’ concerns or witness on that subject. People volunteered from the body of the meeting to speak. Sometimes one person, sometimes two or three, would speak. No one could speak twice until all who wished to speak had done so. This process continued for a year and a half, and it followed seven previous years of attention to the issue in

meetings for learning, threshing sessions, worship-sharing groups, and in an occasional business meeting.

As people had the opportunity to speak from deeply personal experiences, they opened up. They found themselves saying things about themselves they had not even realized before. They said things publicly that previously had been kept private. The meeting community also opened up. It became a time of clarification, change, spiritual growth, new connections and associations, and much shared pain.

A sense of the meeting (unity) finally emerged. Many details were worked through before we arrived at the final wording of a statement that provided for same-gender commitments. In the last business meeting structured in this way, one of the most revered elder members of the meeting rose to speak. He had been unwavering in his opposition to same-gender commitments. A woman who was also a longtime member of the meeting stood up and, in a strong voice, called and said, "For seven long years we have heard you in your opposition. Sit down. The meeting has passed you by." When the clerk asked Friends if the man who had risen should be allowed to speak, there was no doubt that the woman had spoken the meeting's mind and will. The Friend returned to his seat without speaking. The clerk reminded us that arriving at the sense of the meeting did not require unanimity. That reminder made it possible for us to approve a minute and come to closure. Though some members had serious concerns about the process for reaching the decision, they did not stand in the way.

Overall, this long period of personal sharing during our meetings for business was a painful but bonding experience of mutual admonition and accountability. As they listened to each other and to God, Friends sought to accept and under-

stand each other's human experience, even when they did not agree. The meeting moved forward. However, at the last session, when final approval for the same-gender commitment minute was sought, the woman's harsh remark to the older Friend was unexpected. Conversations with the clerk and with members of the meeting at a later time brought forth comments that not only was the eldering appropriate after seven years, but long overdue. Unfortunately, the man's illness and death prevented the meeting from following up with the healing work we desired to do with him and which ideally would have been part of the continuing eldering function.

I recognize the possibility of being misled or overzealous in our eldering, and I share the concerns of many Friends about how to discern when it is appropriate to speak so strongly to another. I am left with the following questions:

- In this particular situation, could the woman's forceful remark be seen as an appropriate interruption of the older Friend's unaware and repetitive comments, and helpful to the meeting overall?
- Does the man's ignoring of the felt sense of the meeting warrant forceful eldering that may be fitting, Spirit-led, and beneficial to the meeting?
- Was there a missed opportunity for nurturing and discernment prior to the actual business session that could have provided grace-filled ways to relate to the disagreeing Friend?
- Throughout the business meeting, was the clerk mindful of guiding the process and holding individuals accountable?
- If these factors are not present, is a door left open for later forceful and Spirit-led eldering?

Special Opportunities for Eldering

Previously I listed a variety of structures that can provide an opportunity for Spirit-led eldering. Following are some examples of these structures that I would like to speak to in more depth.

Transfer of Membership

Friends do not have a creed. We do have beliefs, principles, testimonies, and processes to consider and explore. Therefore, the meeting membership process presents numerous opportunities to practice Spirit-led eldering, such as deep listening, spacious awareness, plain speaking, truth-telling, and accountability. Accountability here is not simply concerned with expecting a person to meet outward expectations of behavior and belief, but with beginning to nurture a deep connection, understanding, and trust in the Spirit as each person finds a right relationship to the meeting community.

My own experience bears this out. I had attended a meeting in New Jersey for two years as a sojourner after moving from the District of Columbia, where I had held membership for thirty-three years. A member of the meeting's committee with responsibility for membership matters requested a visit with me. She wanted to discuss my intention regarding membership in my new meeting and, in doing so, she carried the eldering function. After she greeted me warmly and we caught up with each other's lives, she asked some searching questions. First, she patiently listened and learned of the challenges involved in changing my membership. We reached a mutual understanding concerning my situation. She accepted and understood.

After that, she shared the concern that I should move my membership as soon as I was spiritually and practically ready. She talked of the benefits to the meeting of my committing to be a part of the corporate body. We then went on to reach clarity about the next steps. I volunteered that, God willing, I would change my membership in a year or less depending on concluding my responsibilities in my former monthly and yearly meetings. I regretted that I had not kept the new meeting informed about my situation. Wanting to be accountable, I encouraged her to stay in touch about the matter. After a time of prayer, she left.

I was grateful for this Friend's visit. It showed that the meeting was aware and caring and faithful to its responsibilities. It was helpful to be reminded of my own responsibilities. I valued the fact that she first wanted to understand my current situation and my present relationship to the meeting. I liked that she had spoken clearly and forthrightly about the meeting's expectations and had made no assumptions about what I did or did not know as an experienced Friend. We had made the effort to find a mutually good time and place apart from other activities to have this conversation. Showing this kind of respect, dignity, and value for what may need to happen in a critical and caring process is essential, I believe, for meaningful eldering.

This experience raises the following queries for those carrying out the eldering function and for those to whom it is offered:

- Do we take appropriate time and space to meet with one another for needed business, respecting the person as much as the business to be accomplished?
- Do we have in mind first to listen, to understand, and to accept the other person's present situation?

- Are we equally committed to the needs of the meeting community?
- Are we prepared to explore the situation with an open mind, to determine what is rightly ordered?
- Are we prepared for an outcome of either mutual agreement or mutual disagreement?
- Are we mindful of and turned to the Spirit throughout our exchange?

Application for Membership

The process of application for membership can be a unique opportunity to explore in depth hard questions about faith, love, money, violence, sex, and other matters that are germane to Quaker faith and practice. Deep listening and other aspects of eldering give applicants the opportunity to hear themselves and further discover where they are in relationship to the meeting and where the meeting is in relationship to them. Then a choice may be made by an applicant with the clearness committee about how to proceed. This process is for the benefit of the applicant as well as the meeting. Sometimes significant fears keep us from offering the gift of disclosure and discovery to the participant—fears such as speaking inappropriately, probing too deeply, or appearing exclusive. We need to face our fears and work with them.

A case in point involved an attender who, as a scientist, felt that he had a mission to prove there is no God. Persons from the committee on worship and ministry sat with him a number of times. They explored with him ideas and feelings about meeting for worship. Nothing changed. He appeared to feel that the meeting for worship was fertile ground to win people over to his perspective. For reasons that were unclear, he eventually applied for membership.

After his application was received, another committee struggled to find the best way for him to have a right relationship with the meeting. They decided to invite him, along with four members of the committee, to dinner at the clerk's home. They accepted him as he was. He was eager to tell them of his early trust in religion, followed by betrayal, and ultimately how he had found salvation in science, which was now the only sound basis for his life. He was given the opportunity to talk to them about what was on his mind, his worldview, his sense of humankind and the universe, and how he found his salvation in science. Members listened, accepted, and understood.

Late in the evening, when asked a second time, "Wouldn't you like to know what we believe as Quakers?" he reluctantly agreed. As he listened to the clerk speak of her own experience with Quaker faith and practice, he sputtered with disbelief. He finally said, "That's it!" and unceremoniously left the house. There was no stopping him. Before the week was out, he had withdrawn his application.

In this gathering, the attender was related to as a person, not as a problem. Once he had a sense of being accepted and understood, he no longer needed to defend his viewpoint. He could then listen and hear. He let himself come to a difficult and disconcerting realization. Out of his own freshly gained awareness, he faced the simple reality of his difference from Friends and made a decision. Although the Friends would have welcomed further dialogue and relationship with him, he chose to leave.

The Friends gathering with this individual were able to keep an open mind, avoiding any negativity or reaction. They listened deeply. They had a desire for right order. Later they noted the love and compassion they had for this person. The

most pervasive and powerful aspect in this clearness process was a spacious awareness that allowed for a sense of the Spirit's presence and an entrance into another's life.

This experience raises queries for Friends as a community:

- Can we give priority to finding the energy and time for an extended eldering process when it seems called for?
- Are we willing to live with the consequences of not doing so?
- How are we nurturing our capacity for plain speaking that emerges from the clear, centered, and caring place in which we are empowered to do this kind of eldering?
- How are we growing in our ability to articulate our faith and practices and in our willingness to share them with each other?
- Are we ready to trust the Spirit and give up expectations about outcomes?
- Have we learned to practice deep listening, acceptance, and understanding?
- Are we willing to take responsibility for the quality of our meeting life together by providing a rigorous membership process that brings applicants to their own understanding of Friends' faith and practice and provides a solid beginning to their experience in the meeting?

Nominating Committees

In many meetings, the nominating function tends to be a chore. The committee struggles to find individuals to fill committee positions, perhaps working under the pressure of a deadline. The committee may be frustrated by a sense that there are not enough persons to do all the work. It is tempt-

ing to use a secular approach—whatever is efficient, practical, and gets the job done. And yet, the nominating committee is one of the most important committees in the life of the meeting. A fresh look sees Spirit-led eldering as part of the nominating committee's work. The committee has the opportunity to discern gifts and leadings of individuals and to offer responsibilities in the meeting that fit appropriately for the benefit of the person and the meeting. Members of the committee need to know people and to offer them the gift of being known by others and of being well used as they engage in exploration with individuals throughout the year. Individual meeting members and attenders can discover the satisfaction of service as part of their spiritual growth.

Strawberry Creek Meeting in Berkeley, California, has been leading the way in developing a Spirit-led process for nominations. The Spirit-led eldering quality of the process enables a connection to be made between gifts and service. More than one former nominating committee now calls itself a "committee for the discovery of gifts and leadings."

Using such a process often results in less contentious committee meetings. It lessens the possibility that persons will accept a committee appointment on the basis of social conditioning to be dutiful or to be obliging, and it may minimize the likelihood of a person accepting a committee appointment and then not taking responsibility in that committee's work. Such a process could help a meeting come to grips with the rightness of laying down a committee when no Spirit-led persons are available to support its work. Finally, there is a greater likelihood of committee work being in line with the Spirit and the spiritual life of the meeting.

Nominating committees may encourage the formation of small groups for the discernment of gifts. During a group

worship period, each member in turn seeks to recognize and encourage the giftedness of every other participating individual. In time, a person who feels that she has nothing to contribute may discover, for example, that her passion for reading can be put to use in recommending books in the meeting newsletter. Another person comes to realize that his gift is intercessory prayer.

A meeting may consider the following queries in conjunction with the nominating process:

- How may each of us seek to do the inner work needed to become more prepared, ready to respond to others and to circumstances of the meeting in the service of the Spirit in our community?
- How are we paying attention, blessing, calling forth, and nurturing our own and each other's gifts as we support the work of the nominating committee?

How to Elder

I am frequently asked, "What do people say when they are eldering? What is the nature of the dialogue?" I do not know how to answer. There is no one dialogue, no one way to speak, no single context in which eldering happens. Rather, eldering is a state of spiritual consciousness and perception in which one makes oneself available and open to the mutual good, guided by certain principles.

In such consciousness, people know each other in the oneness of Spirit. We reach out to others from this spiritual consciousness—for our sake as well as theirs—with a deep desire to hold all in alignment with the Spirit. We may affirm others'

ministry, support them, raise serious questions, acknowledge their gifts, call forth their courage to make change, challenge the course they are on, delight in their creativity, or in other ways be present for them.

Sometimes being annoyed with a person or being angry about a concern may precede the occasion for eldering. It can be helpful to remember that eldering is most deeply effective when the work is done not from an ordinary consciousness but from a spiritual consciousness, regardless of the conditions that have led up to it.

The eldering function flows not out of a sense of conforming to rigid rules or set patterns, but out of our sensitivity to inner guidance and spiritual perception. For any situation that we may face—positive or negative—there is, at the core, spiritual truth to be discovered.

The Spirit may express the eldering function through a seasoned Friend, a named elder, an inspired person, or an aware child—and it may arise in a planned or a spontaneous way. Since the Spirit moves in unexpected ways, one needs to be careful not to let preconceived ideas close off awareness.

The Internal Dialogue

The dialogue central to Spirit-led eldering is the inner dialogue between ourselves and the Spirit. The ultimate authority is the Inner Light, which we understand with increasing fullness as we experience it working in our own lives. Since this same Light is in all people and can illumine each soul, the Light in one person may answer the Light in another. *This is a basic assumption underlying Spirit-led eldering.*

When one is led to live out the eldering function, a dialogue in which one listens and responds to the authority of the Inner Light is primary. This dialogue may happen in spontaneous prayer, in our private time of reflection and journaling, with our personal care and clearness committee, or with a trusted friend. We may take our leading to a meeting committee. The following queries can help in this discernment process for moving into spiritual leadership.

Regarding the source of one's intention:

- Where is the Spirit in this matter?
- Am I coming from a centered place, or am I reacting out of my own unresolved issues?
- Is my personality or ego getting in the way?
- Is this contemplated step necessary for the benefit of the person to be elderd and/or for the meeting?
- Am I a prayed for, prayerful, and prepared person open to continual discernment and guidance?

Regarding my attitude:

- Do I love the person irrespective of circumstances and the conditions of his behavior?
- Can I accept and understand the person as she is?
- Am I prepared to embrace both the substance and shadow (substance is that which is of God and shadow is that which keeps us from God) within the person and relate to that totality, not just to the particular concern?
- Am I prepared to express the truth of affirmation, appreciation, and affection as well as lovingly to confront?
- Is my desire to *be* right or to make the situation right?

Regarding process:

- Am I clear that the purpose of eldering is not primarily to effect a specific behavioral change, but to support one another in keeping to that alignment with the Spirit out of which good order comes?
- Do I understand that no matter how wise and skillful I may be in facilitating disclosure and discovery, much remains hidden, and that there is profound rightness and power in bringing a person to God and leaving her there?
- Am I sufficiently receptive and attentive to the Spirit that I am ready to be used as an instrument in whatever unusual way that opens?
- Am I prepared by my discipline and practice in a sufficiently clear and mindful way to intervene directly or to interrupt a situation when called for?
- Are there times when I know to *wait* until a problem behavior by repetition clearly becomes a fault; and am I then mindful of the words of Paul: "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such a one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted" (Gal. 6:1)?

Generating our own fresh queries based on what we are called to do can be helpful. And as we read these queries, we can see that the intention of Spirit-led eldering is not only to help the other's behavior to be in alignment with the Spirit, but for both persons to be in right relationship with each other. Isaac Penington wrote to a person in a troubled relationship:

I have heard that thou hast somewhat against W.R.,
whereupon thou forbearst coming to meetings at his

house: this thou oughtst seriously to weigh and consider; that thy path and walking herein may be right and straight before the Lord. Is the thing, or are the things, which thou hast against him fully so as thou apprehendest? Hast thou seen evil in him, or to break forth from him? and hast thou considered *him* therein; and dealt with him as if it had been thy own case? Hast thou pitied him, mourned over him, cried to the Lord for him, and in tender love and meekness of spirit, laid the thing before him? And if he hath refused to hear thee, hast thou tenderly mentioned it to others, and desired them to go with thee to him, that what is evil and offensive in him might be more weightily and advantageously laid before him for his humbling, and for his recovery into that which is a witness and strength against the evil? If thou hadst proceeded thus, thou hast proceeded tenderly and orderly, according to the law of brotherly love, and God's witness in thy conscience will justify thee therein. But, if thou hast let in any hardness of spirit, or hard reasonings against him, the witness of God will not justify thee in that.¹¹

Listening

I continue to resonate to the following passage from Douglas Steere in *Where Words Come From*: "To 'listen' another's soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another."¹²

The quality and nature of this kind of listening rest on another assumption: that there is a God-given knowing and

wisdom within each of us to be brought forth. Such listening is prayer and goes beyond cognitive, logical interaction. The listener doesn't have total responsibility. The listener gives up expectations about outcome and simply trusts.

Steere points to what truly makes a difference in listening:

Human listening then becomes what it is: a precious thin point in the membrane where the human and divine action can be felt to mingle. The human action can begin at any point, the conversation can start where it will, but if it goes on, the living Listener's presence may almost imperceptibly rise into awareness, and with that awareness, the total situation is altered."¹³

As we discern our places within the eldering process, we are frequently led to be nondirective, often with telling results, as love's imagination works through us. This gentle approach probably best characterizes the leadings in some of the stories accompanying this essay. Even so, let us remain open to being called to more directive or forceful approaches, as the Spirit works through us in unpredictable ways.

The Mystery of Eldering

I long to find corporate Quaker understanding and support for calling forth the goodness in each other at every opportunity, even as we encourage each other to put aside that which gets in the way of our relationship with the Divine.

For me, eldering is not so much something we do as it is something we are. When eldering has a centered perception that is mindful of persons, circumstances, and situations that are either in alignment with the Spirit or not, then we can

be guided to function accordingly. In fact, a life lived in the Spirit can be a powerful form of eldering itself.

As members and attenders of a monthly meeting take great risks in allowing any worshiper to offer spoken ministry in meeting for worship, so do we take great risks in our commitment to love each other (*agape*) as a part of our meeting. In each of these areas as well as in others, our behavior is expected to be the result of spiritual guidance and direction that comes with inward search, prayer, study, and as full as possible comprehension of the other person and situation.

Today among Friends, we find considerable concern that any desire to elder be taken first to a committee. There can be spiritual soundness and wisdom in turning to an appropriate committee for clarity and direction. Such a process creates safeguards against individualism, egocentricity, and acting on the basis of a limited understanding. It helps us to stay centered, receptive, free from ego, and more ready to be a clear channel. With equal soundness, a concerned person may wish to turn to other meeting structures such as a spiritual friendship, a prayer group, a clearness committee, internal dialogue with queries, or an accountability and friendship group for the same purposes.

Depending on the circumstances and participants, we have a choice as a community of which structure we use. The particular structure is not as important as is our intention to be Spirit-led and to stay connected and nurtured by our faith community.

Ron Selleck has written:

Many were lost in the nineteenth century by the sometimes senseless rigor of the Quaker discipline administered by an elder. But a wholesome discipline can err in

two directions—not just one. Both an unspiritual rigor and unspiritual laxity are destructive of life. If many were lost then to rigor, many more are lost today to lukewarmness, indifference, and apathy masquerading as tolerance and long suffering.¹⁴

The Spirit will bless our investment in the life of the meeting and our expectation that ways will open. We will often be surprised and disarmed. There are those times when a person's mind is open, when one's vision is clear, when the conditioning of one's culture falls away, and one's well-grounded values are in place. During those times a connection is made with God-given wisdom and insight, and a person is used by the Spirit to convey Truth. Such moments may occur knowingly or unknowingly, spontaneously or intermittently over a period of time, and they can be most telling and effective. Children and young people are frequently used in this way, sometimes to our chagrin. The Spirit may also break through in wonderfully admonishing ways, through people and circumstances least expected to be vehicles for the Spirit—including persons caught up in addictions, compulsions, or physical and mental limitations.

No matter how much outward structure we may have, such as seasoned suggestions, penetrating queries, wise guidelines, flexible criteria, and a Spirit-led process to aid us, the heart of the eldering experience—our awareness of God breaking through and discovering ourselves in a moment of alignment with the Spirit—is an indefinable, uncontrollable, and unpredictable mystery.

Endnotes

1. "Overseer" is a historic Quaker term for those individuals who exercise pastoral care in a meeting. The word is still widely in use, but many meetings are replacing it with terms such as "care of members," "nurturance," or other expressions that have more positive associations for modern speakers.
2. Sandra Cronk, *Gospel Order: A Quaker Understanding of Faithful Church Community*. (Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill, Pendle Hill Pamphlet # 297, 1991), 24-25.
3. Historically, overseers concerned themselves with members' morals in daily life while elders guided the ministers. But today Friends often use the word "eldering" for all acts of guidance, support, or admonition.
4. John Richardson, *An Account of the Life of that Ancient Servant of Jesus Christ, John Richardson*, in William Evans and Thomas Evans, eds., *Friends Library*, vol. 4 (Philadelphia: printed by Joseph Rakestraw for the editors, 1840), 87.
5. See Howard Brinton, *Friends for 350 Years* (Philadelphia: Pendle Hill, 2002 [1952]), 151.
6. Samuel Bownas, *An Account of Samuel Bownas* in William Evans and Thomas Evans, eds., *Friends Library*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: printed by Joseph Rakestraw for the editors, 1939), 3.
7. Brinton, *ibid*, 106.
8. *Remarkable Anecdote: Illustrating the Salutary Effects of Persevering Endeavors to Restore Peace and Harmony* in John Comly and Isaac Comly, eds., *Friends Miscellany*, vol. 5. (Philadelphia: printed for the editors by J. Richards, 1934), 369-373.
9. Margery Mears Larrabee, "Sprit-Led Eldering," *Friends Journal*, October 2005, 28. Cited with permission of Friends Publishing Corporation.
10. Brinton, *ibid*, 119.
11. Isaac Penington, *Letters of Isaac Penington* (Philadelphia: Book Association of Friends, 1883), 124-125.
12. Douglas Steere, *Where Words Come From* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1955), 27.
13. *Ibid*.
14. Ron Selleck, "Quaker Elder," *Quaker Life*, January-February, 1983, 13.

Online Bibliographies for Those Who Elder

- "Selected Bibliography on Ministry and Eldering" by the Traveling Ministries Program of Friends General Conference. See: <http://www.fgcquaker.org/traveling/bibliography.html>.
- "Short Bibliography on Ministry and Eldering" by Jan Hoffman and Kenneth Sutton, available at <http://homefries.org/Qbibliominister.html>.